

### PVT after splenectomy

I read with interest the article on the incidence of portal vein thrombosis (PVT) after laparoscopic splenectomy (*Can J Surg* 2005;48:352-4).<sup>1</sup> I agree with the authors' assumption that the frequency of PVT after laparoscopic splenectomy is just as high as that after open splenectomy. I believe that the laparoscopic procedure per se has no bearing on the occurrence of PVT, which is found mainly in patients who undergo splenectomy for benign and malignant hematologic conditions. I also believe that PVT is more likely to occur after splenectomy if the postsplenectomy platelet count is greater than  $1000 \times 10^9/L$ , although it may occur at lower counts as the authors have indicated.

In a review of 55 patients who underwent open splenectomy for various indications in our unit, only 2 (3.6%) had PVT; both had portal hypertension, and splenectomy was performed as part of an emergency devascularization procedure for bleeding esophageal varices.<sup>2</sup> PVT should be suspected in any patient who is not progressing smoothly in the early postoperative period after splenectomy and who complains of vague upper abdominal pain and has a low-grade fever in the absence of an apparent cause. The 2 patients who suffered PVT in the authors' study had idiopathic thrombocytopenia (ITP). In our series, none of the patients with ITP had PVT, and although we practise in an area where sickle cell disease is prevalent, none of them suffered PVT after splenectomy.<sup>2</sup> Also, although hematologic causes were the second commonest indication for splenectomy after trauma, PVT did not develop, casting doubt on the assumption that PVT is more common after splenectomy for hematologic conditions. My personal theory — which needs further substantiation — is that the frequency of splenic and portal vein thrombosis is increased when the splenic artery is first tied before proceeding with splenectomy. For the time being, we have to accept — as the authors implied — that there is no increased incidence of PVT after laparoscopic splenectomy.

**Abdul-Wahed Meshikhes, FRCS**  
Department of Surgical Specialties  
King Fahad Specialist Hospital  
Dammam, Saudi Arabia

**Competing interests:** None declared.

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### (Drs. Harris and Marcaccio reply)

Thank you for your interest in our article. Your response does highlight a number of important issues. First, there is growing evidence that the prevalence of occult PVT is many-fold greater than that of clinically evident disease. Improvements in diagnostic imaging will likely continue to augment this discrepancy. Although it seems prudent that patients with occult PVT receive anticoagulants, it is unknown if anticoagulation improves patient outcomes. On the other hand, symptomatic patients obviously need to be investigated and treated promptly.

Although our study suggests that the rate of PVT after laparoscopic splenectomy is at least as high as after open splenectomy, Ikeda and associates<sup>1</sup> found in a recent study that the incidence of thrombosis after laparoscopic splenectomy was 55% — significantly higher than after open splenectomy. Although further research is needed, it remains possible that unique features of laparoscopic splenectomy (pneumoperitoneum, positioning, use of staplers) do modify the risk of thrombosis. But how operative factors contribute to the risk of thrombosis remains unknown.

Lastly, it is important to acknowledge that even if all patients are screened for PVT using the same imaging techniques and protocol, it seems evident that the rate of PVT will vary among series. It is well established that hematologic malignant conditions do carry an elevated risk of thrombosis. Hence, the composition of each series will influence the observed frequency of thrombosis. It is also likely that benign disease such as ITP, sickle cell disease and thalassemia each have unique risk profiles. Furthermore, it is al-

ways worth considering whether additional comorbidities specific to a patient population being served (i.e., protein C and S deficiencies, synchronous malignant conditions) are influencing observed outcomes.

**William Harris, MD**  
**Michael Marcaccio, MD**  
Department of Surgery  
Hamilton Health Sciences  
McMaster University  
Hamilton, Ont.

**Competing interests:** None declared.

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### Preoperative fasting guidelines

As a principal investigator in studies of a 2- to 3-hour fast for clear liquids in Calgary in the late 1980s, and a member of the American Society of Anesthesiologists' task force that developed evidence-based fasting guidelines, I wish to discuss the Canadian Association of General Surgeons (CAGS) review and commentary of preoperative fasting for adults.<sup>1</sup>

The authors state that the "classical surgical and anesthesia dictum has been that" healthy patients "should be kept NPO from midnight the night before operation." This is questionable if by "classical" they mean an established pattern of practice sanctioned by a body of literature. In 1883, Lister<sup>2</sup> recommended that patients should drink clear liquid about 2 hours before surgery, but there should be no solid matter in the stomach. For the next 80 years, textbook fasting guidelines were 2-3 hours for clear liquids and 4-6 hours for easily digestible solids. These were consistent with the known rapid gastric emptying of clear liquids and the slower digestion and emptying of solids. It was only in the 1960s that most American anesthesia textbooks changed, without new evidence, to NPO after midnight.

Our first Calgary study demonstrated

wide inter-patient variability in gastric fluid volume at induction of anesthesia in healthy patients. Mean volume was less in those who drank 150 mL water 2–3 hours preoperatively than in those who received NPO from midnight,<sup>3</sup> most of whom had had no oral intake for 12–18 hours. Further studies from Calgary and other centres, to which the authors refer, confirmed that drinking 150–450 mL or more of clear liquid (water, black coffee or tea, fruit juice) until 2–3 hours before surgery did not increase gastric fluid volume compared with NPO from midnight. If volume is not increased, the risk of pulmonary aspiration is not increased.

The 1990 guidelines of the Canadian Anaesthetists' Society, quoted by the authors, of a total fast of no less than 5 hours, are long out of date. In 1999, the American Society of Anesthesiologists published preoperative fasting guidelines of 6 hours for easily digested solids and 2 hours for clear liquid for healthy patients scheduled to undergo elective surgery.<sup>4</sup> The Canadian Anesthesiologists' Society adopted similar guidelines the following year.<sup>5</sup>

Cooperation of anesthesia and surgical colleagues and nurses is essential for a change to evidence-based guidelines. At Foothills Medical Centre in 1988, we presented our evidence of the safety of clear liquids to a joint meeting of surgeons and anesthesiologists and then to head nurses of our ambulatory and surgical nursing units. The clinical heads of anesthesia and surgery provided details of the revised guidelines in a joint letter to all attending and resident surgeons and anesthesiologists, with copies to the head nurses. Fasting instructions in the hospital's nursing policy manual were then re-

vised. Patients may choose to drink from a list of clear liquids until 4 hours before the *scheduled* time of surgery, so that a change in the surgical schedule can be made and still allow 2 hours before the *actual* time of surgery.

#### J. Roger Maltby, MB BChir

Professor Emeritus of Anaesthesia  
University of Calgary  
Calgary, Alta.

**Competing interests:** None declared.

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#### (The authors reply)

We appreciate Dr. Maltby's comments regarding the Evidence Based Reviews in Surgery (EBRS) article on preoperative fasting published in the October 2005 issue of the *Canadian Journal of Surgery*. We are pleased that Dr. Maltby agrees with the evidence provided and supports a policy of fasting of 6 hours for easily digested solids and 2 hours for clear liquids in patients who undergo elective operative therapy. Dr. Maltby questioned the phrase "classical surgical and anesthesia dictum has been that patients ... should be kept NPO from midnight the night before operation." We would agree completely with his contention that guidelines should be evidence-based, and the best evidence suggests that policy is unnecessary. It must be pointed out, however, that at many hospitals this "classical" dictum persists. One of the aims of EBRS is to provide the current best evidence on a topic, hopefully resulting in a change in clinical practice. Thus, we thank Dr. Maltby for his comments and concur completely with his recommendations.

#### Robin McLeod, MD

University of Toronto  
Toronto, Ont.

#### William Fitzgerald, MD

Charles C. Curtis Memorial Hospital  
St. Anthony, Nfld.

#### Michael Sarr, MD

Mayo Clinic College of Medicine  
Rochester, Minn.

**Competing interests:** None declared.